**Video Games: Pros and Cons**

***Article at a Glance***  
• Video games can be used to help improve test scores, teach life and job skills, improve brain function, and encourage physical exercise.  
• Most popular video games are addictive by design.  
• Because video games can have a negative impact on health and academic performance if a child becomes addicted, parents should be aware of the symptoms.

Kids have been hooked on video games for years. And the release of mobile gaming systems have made them even more prevalent, making it easy for kids to play games in the car or the checkout line of the grocery store. With smart phones becoming more common, it is hard to find a kid who is not playing some kind of game on an electronic device.

Although video games get a lot of bad press, they do have their benefits. The trick is to find games that foster learning and are age appropriate, while helping your child learn to set limits. Video games should enhance our lives, not take them over.

**The Pros**

**Education:** Studies have found that video games improve students’ ability to learn. When video games have been used in the classroom, teachers see improved test scores. Games also allow students to learn and then apply what they have learned in a real-life situation. This has been especially helpful for students in the medical field who can practice procedures via simulations rather than on a real person. Companies are even using video games to train new employees.

**Life Skills:** Many video games teach kids how to delegate, work as a team, and prioritize.

**Improved Brain Function:** Video games have been shown to help us improve our ability to reason and solve problems, make split-second decisions, process information much more quickly, and multitask effectively. They also improve hand-eye coordination and boost auditory perception.

**Exercise:** Motion-controlled games like Kinect for Xbox 360 and Wii are a great way to motivate people to get active. A 2010 survey by the American Heart Association and Nintendo of America showed that games requiring active-play increased physical activity in the real world.

**Job Skills:** The Federation of American Scientists (FAS) argues that kids need to play more video games in order to be competitive in the current job market. In a report they released in 2010, FAS said, “The success of complex video games demonstrates that games can teach higher-order thinking skills such as strategic thinking, interpretative analysis, problem solving, plan formulation and execution, and adaptation to rapid change. These are the skills U.S. employers increasingly seek in workers and new workforce entrants.”

**The Cons**

**Violence:** While there is still a lot of debate in this area, some studies have shown that video games with high levels of violence could be linked to fighting, delinquency, and violent criminal behavior. Studies involving brain scans of children while playing violent and nonviolent video games show that children playing violent video games showed a decrease in activity in brain areas that control self-control and an increase in emotional arousal.

Even though researchers are still working to prove a direct cause-and-effect relationship, parents should be aware of the influence violent games may have on their children. Parents should help their children pick out which games they buy, rather than just letting their children make the choices.

**Addictive:** A study by Iowa State University in 2011 found that 3 percent of girls and 12 percent of boys who play video games will become addicted. What makes video games addictive? Playing video games releases dopamine into our systems, which gives us a feeling of pleasure and tells our brain to “do it again.”

In fact, video games are designed to be addictive. John Hopson, a games researcher at Microsoft Game Studios who has worked on games like Halo and a doctor of behavioral and brain sciences, writes an article about the science that goes behind making a game addictive. In “Behavioral Game Design” he explains how you can control behavior by providing simple stimulus and rewards at strategic times and places. In the article he states, “By understanding the fundamental patterns that underlie how players respond to what we ask of them, we can design games to bring out the kind of player we want.”

Most susceptible to video game addiction are children with poor impulse control or who have a hard time fitting in. Video games are often used to fill the void that is created when people are unable to form relationships with people in the “real world.”

Parents should be aware of how much their children are playing video games and if it is affecting other aspects of their lives. Even though video games have their place, children should also devote plenty of time to exercising, interacting with others, studying, and sleeping. Children also need to learn how not to be constantly engaged. Playing video games too much can lead to an increased risk of obesity and poor academic performance.

Things to watch for are: falling grades, not sleeping enough or feelings of fatigue, free-time is used almost exclusively for playing video games, irritable when not playing video games, neglect of hygiene, and increased anxiety.

**Our Role**

Video games can play a positive role in our children’s lives, but we need to be there to set limits and to teach them how to use video games in a healthy way. If you are worried that your child is becoming too obsessed with a video game, then it is time to sit down and talk. Let your child know that you are worried about how much time he is spending on video games and talk to him about the symptoms. Be sensitive and nonjudgmental. Talk to your child about some of the consequences of video game addiction and about some ways to become more engaged in other aspects of life. If you feel like you need help, don’t be afraid to talk to a therapist who specializes in adolescents.